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# South End Nights

Bill Ravanesi

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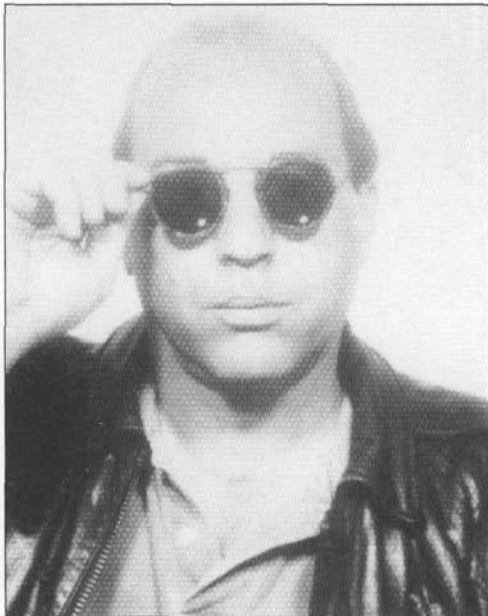
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# *South End Nights*

BILL RAVANESI

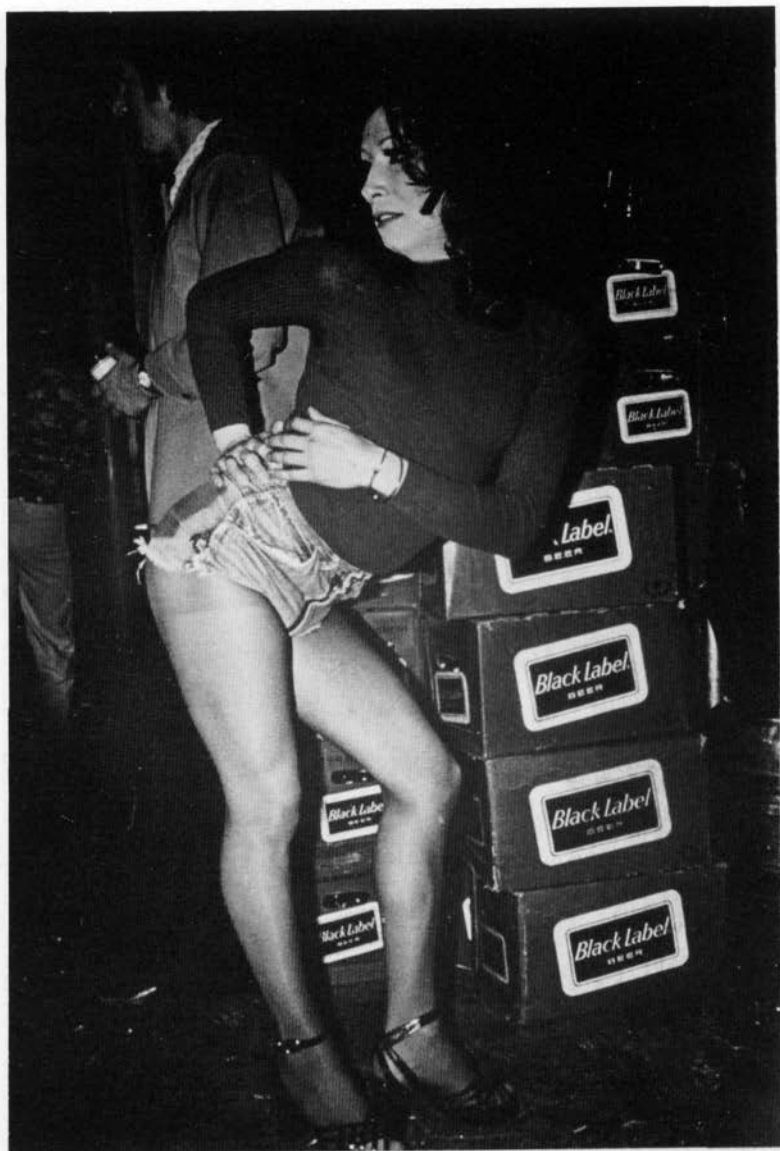
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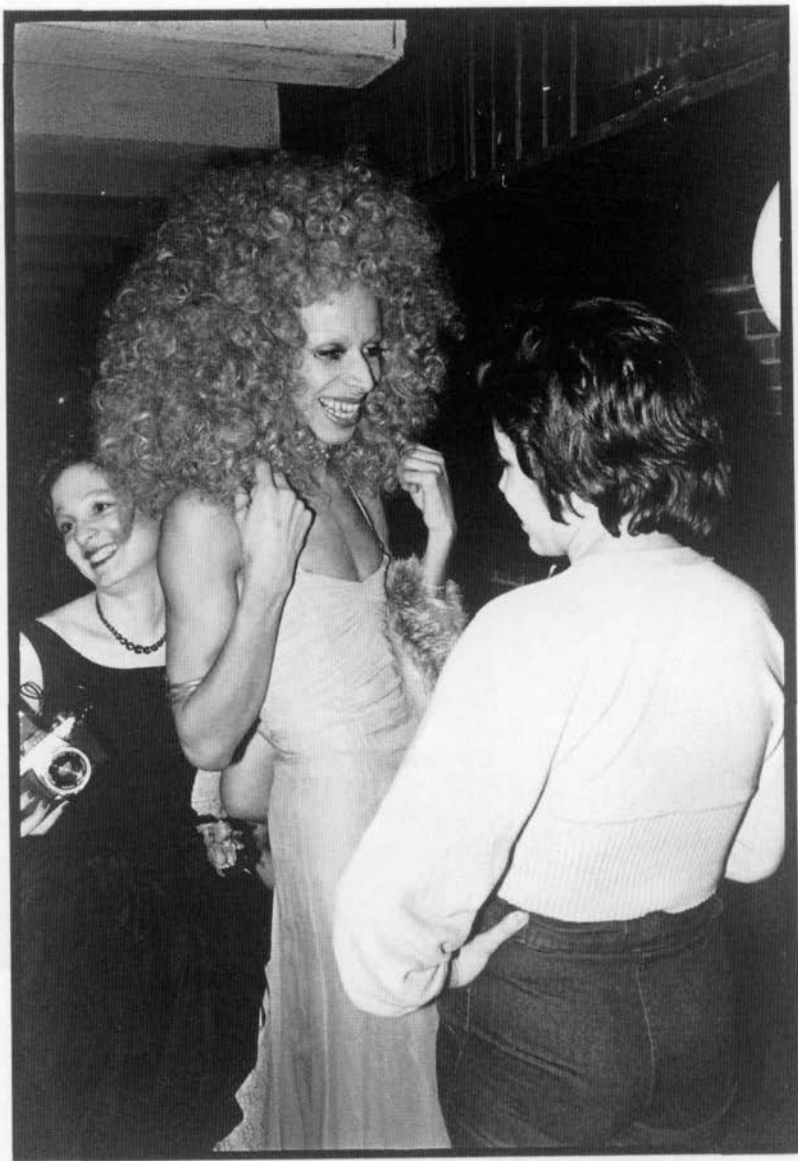
BILL RAVANESI













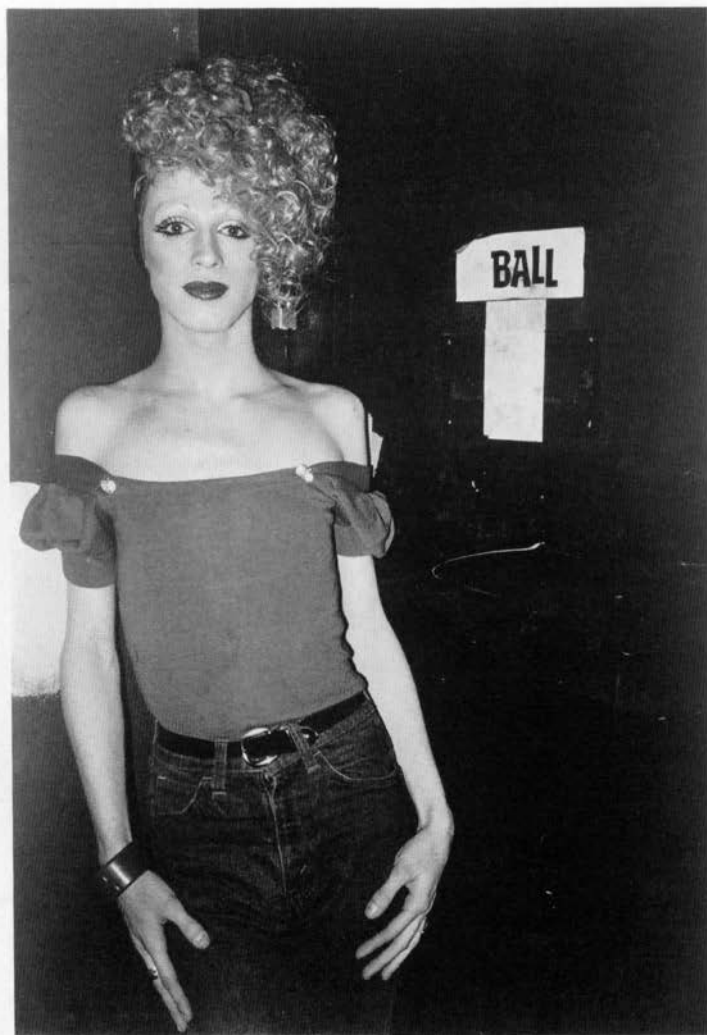


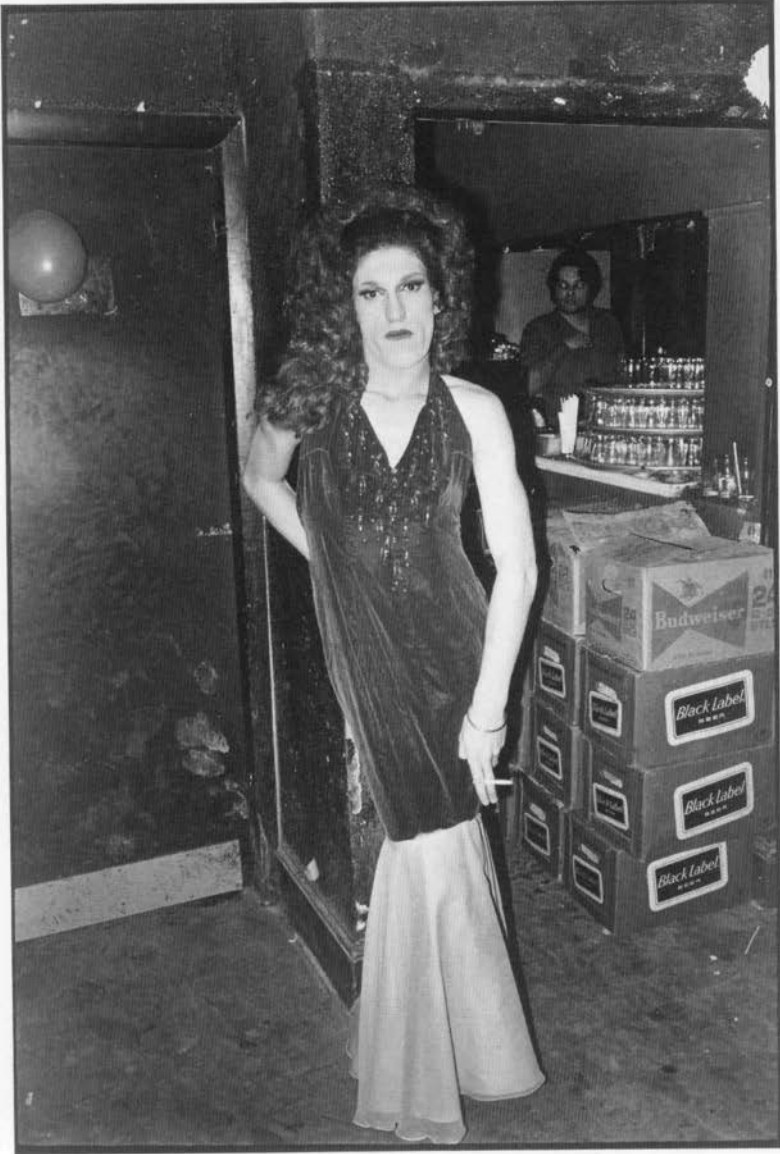




















## A Note on the Photographs

I began my first photographic project, *South End Nights*, in 1972. It dealt with young men and teenagers, some who were cross-dressers and others on their way to transsexualism. I shot my photographs in late-night Boston, between the hours of 11 pm and 3 am, three to four times a week. This was the first time I had ever used the camera to “see.”

Before I began this project, I had never really thought about using my camera in any special way. I used it as my family had—to record family outings, to make outdoor snapshots (I remember jumping out of Dad’s Super 88 Olds to snap a sunset), or to “document” memorable events—the trout my uncle Addie hooked each year on opening day at Walden Pond. Then at age 23, having finished college and having earned some money, I decided to travel through Europe for a half year.

It was in Europe that I discovered and became entranced by art; museums became my daily fix. This was totally unexpected for me, since it had not been a large part of my upbringing, nor had it been a part of my studies at college. I still remember vividly the moment which changed the direction of my life. It was in Rome at the Galleria Borghese. The gallery was lined with great Renaissance masterpieces, one after the other; but one painting, among them all, stood out for me. It was *David with the Head of Goliath* by Caravaggio. The painting transfixed me; Caravaggio had “carved” his figures not out of black but out of darkness—the painting was a remembrance of death. A striking document. It seared into my mind’s eye, and woke something in me.

When I returned to Boston several months later, I registered at ImageWorks, a newly organized school of photography and related media. There I got to know firsthand the work of well-known contemporary photographers. Among those who particularly influenced me were Lisette Model, Bruce Davidson, and Danny Lyon.

While at ImageWorks, I was living in the South End of Boston, a funky run-down neighborhood with cheap rents. A neighbor invited me to join her at a party. I stepped into a setting that in those days of *La Dolce Vita*, I could only call Fellini-esque—guys in drag, rooms dimly lit by candles, clutching couples, figures surfacing from alcoves, shadows, and darkness. The scene triggered something in me that related to my Caravaggio experience. I knew I had found a subject for my camera.

The party connection led me to a raunchy, swinging, local South End bar, “The Other Side.” There I saw drag queens and gays on the prowl. There I bore witness to what our head doctors call “Gender Identity Disorder”—transsexuals as well as transvestites. The bar had them all,

crowded, drinking and jumping. It was lit just like the party, low light and lots of darkness. Your eyes had to adjust for a few minutes before you could work your way around the space. Not a place to use a viewfinder and focus comfortably.

I decided to hang out for several weeks and to ease into my act of photographing the scene. I generally wore the same getup as most did; the uniform was jeans, black crew-neck sweater, leather cap. The only difference was I had my Leica camera, with a small strobe light perched on top, dangling from my neck.

And so, I photographed *South End Nights*.

BILL RAVANESI  
Princeton, 1994

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